INDIAN INVOLVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

Pankaj Singh, United Nations

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/pankaj_singh/6/
Indian Involvement in Afghanistan

By Pankaj Singh

India’s unwavering role in long-term Afghan stability continues to create a significant challenge to the Taliban and its supporters, who view assistance as strengthening the democratic regime in Kabul.

As insecurity and violence in Afghanistan intensify, and the policymakers in the U.S. struggle with the right strategy — counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism — New Delhi has indicated a strategic shift in thinking from a military to political solution to the Afghan war. In an interview to The Wall Street Journal on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly, External Affairs Minister S.M. Krishna said India did not believe that war can solve any problem and that applies to Afghanistan too. There has been a considerable shift in New Delhi’s thinking in the political uncertainty following the recently-held Afghan polls. India expressed support for a “national unity” government. There is also recognition of the need for a reconciliation process in building a politically inclusive order. In an international closed-door seminar held recently, India’s Foreign Secretary made a specific reference to “reintegration of individuals into the mainstream.”

This could have been construed as weaning away the reconcileable tribal fighters from the ideologically hardened leadership — “separating the fish from the pond” — a classic counter-insurgency principle India has used in its own counter-insurgency campaigns. This could have triggered a response mechanism of attack on the embassy to project the Taliban as not amenable to talks or reconciliation, thus denying India a larger political role in Afghanistan. Indian political and economic influence is increasing in Afghanistan, including significant development efforts and financial investment.

India, being the sixth largest bilateral donor, has pledged around $1.2 billion in several reconstruction and development projects within Afghanistan. In fact, India’s engagement in Afghanistan has come a long way since the closure of its embassy in Kabul in September 1996 to the August 2005 visit of the Indian Prime Minister, the first in 29 years. Since the January 2002 Tokyo Conference for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, India has committed an assistance of $550 million. India has been involved in training programmes and in humanitarian and infrastructure development projects in Afghanistan. India’s contribution in the training of Afghan diplomats, judges, police officers, doctors; developing Afghanistan’s civil aviation and transport sectors; construction of roads, dams, hospitals, educational institutions; and in establishing telecom and power transmission lines is a widely acclaimed fact.

Interestingly, India’s “aid diplomacy” has generated intense domestic debate, given the vulnerabilities its projects and personnel face in Afghanistan. While some would want India to send troops, others propound continuation of the ‘aid only’ policy. While the latter option would not be in India’s long-term strategic interests, an outright military response of troop deployment, apart from its limited utility, would work straight into propaganda of the Taliban and its sponsors.

What India needs in the near-term is a reinvigorated policy in terms of protecting its projects and carving out a larger regional role in the long-term stability of Afghanistan. Amid talks of U.S. withdrawal, India needs to consider long-term scenarios of its political, diplomatic and military options. In a revamped diplomatic strategy, India can work towards the creation of a “concert of powers” — a regional grouping including the U.S., Russia, the EU, India, Iran, CAR (Central Asian Republics) and China.

While the American policymakers are looking for an exit strategy, Indian policymakers will have to take bold and innovative ideas of evolving regional mechanisms for anti-terror activities. There is need for seamless information-sharing, joint patrolling, border regimes and confidence-building measures among the regional powers.

The importance of Afghanistan’s security situation to the region in general and India specifically cannot be over-emphasized, particularly in view of the objectives of Mr. Obama’s “surge and withdraw” strategy. The Obama administration sees this war as one that it was burdened with, and consequently, is focused on extricating itself from the situation, while ensuring that some semblance of government apparatus remains functional in Afghanistan. But it would be unrealistic to expect the Afghanistan National Army (ANA) to pick up from where the United States left off, defend the country and deter the Taliban from expanding its influence. Today, only about 40 percent of ANA units are capable of conducting operations with US/ISAF support. By President Hamid
Karzai’s own admission, it would take another five years before the ANA can take over from foreign forces and that too, only if training of ANA forces is accelerated. Karzai’s coalition-building needs to be viewed realistically. For the foreseeable future, Afghanisation will need to involve the so-called warlords who are allied to Karzai. There simply is no alternative.

At a local level, India needs to widen its web of engagement beyond the Karzai government. Its Afghan policy in the past few years has alienated its traditional support base among the Northern Alliance groups who have increasingly aligned with Iran. There are alienated Pushtun communities in southern and eastern Afghanistan, who are in need of India’s support in building local capacities. These groups can be cultivated as protectors of Indian aid projects by making community participation and local ownership a key plank of the aid policy.

On the military front, India can enhance the training for the Afghan National Police in counter-insurgency given its experience in building a COIN grid in Jammu and Kashmir. The focus should turn towards a strategy of counter-terrorism with rapid Afghanisation, namely, the transfer of responsibility to the Afghans. All the help that other regional countries are able to offer to accelerate the Afghanisation process must be welcomed.

The challenges and constraints to India’s Afghan policy are immense. The strong element of unpredictability and uncertainty in Afghan politics calls for constant evaluation of India’s options in Afghanistan. The growing Indo-Afghan ties are commensurate with India’s geo-economics interests both within and beyond the Indian Subcontinent. The perfectly timed visit of the Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh to Kabul on August 28-29, 2005, just three weeks before the crucial September 18 elections, and the areas of cooperation identified between the two countries, makes it amply clear that India is looking for a tangible and a long-term engagement in Afghanistan. Apart from the political uncertainty in Afghanistan and India’s own resource-limitations, the Indo-Afghan relationship is constrained by its geography and the Pakistan factor.

The fact that India does not have borders contiguous with Afghanistan puts India into a dependency mode. Pakistan’s refusal to provide overland transit facilities for Indian goods bound for Afghanistan and further to Iran and the Central Asian markets has led to India taking a longer and a circuitous sea route via Iran. Ironically, Pakistan allows Afghanistan to transport its goods bound for India. The delicate nature of the ongoing political process in Afghanistan and the fractious nature of Afghan polity, coupled with Pakistan’s intransigence in facilitating
Indo-Afghan trade, are likely to test the resilience of Indo-Afghan ties.

The current challenge before India, given the above constraints, is how to sustain the growing momentum of its relationship with Afghanistan. Some of the viable options before India are:

- India needs to consolidate and build up on its four years of achievements in Afghanistan by not letting Manmohan Singh’s recent visit become a touch-and-go affair. If India is to reach out to Central Asia and the Gulf region, Indo-Afghan ties have to be high in the order of priority. India should not lose sight of the geostrategic significance of Afghanistan, as its growing political and economic interests lie both within the parliamentarians and to subsequently invite them to India.

Given the uncertainties of Indo-Pak ties, India needs to strengthen the infrastructure which facilitates its trade with Afghanistan via Iran. The construction of Zarani-Delaram road (providing Afghanistan’s access to the Iranian coast) is a crucial step in the same direction. It will be prudent if alternate routes to Afghanistan and Central Asia, particularly via Iran, are developed and strengthened. Indo-Iranian ties are vital to facilitating trade not only with Afghanistan but also with the Gulf region and Central Asia. India should continue to explore ways of overcoming its geographical limitations by circumventing Pakistan.

- India should further broad-base its engagement in Afghanistan by promoting greater institutional cooperation between the two countries. Identifying new areas of cooperation and opening new vistas of joint ventures will have to be a continuing process. India needs to engage diverse groups within the civil society in Afghanistan, such as, political parties, intellectuals, NGOs, educational and research institutions, media groups, cultural organisations, businessmen and so on. Given the shared past and civilization ties between the two countries, the idea of establishing an Indian Cultural Centre in Afghanistan and vice-versa can go a long way in reinvigorating the two countries’ relationship.

- With Afghanistan now having a newly elected parliament, regular interaction between the parliamentarians can go a long way strengthening the relations between the two governments. India can take the initiative by sending a parliamentary delegation to Kabul to interact with the newly elected Afghan parliamentarians and to subsequently invite them to India.

At a local level, India needs to widen its web of engagement beyond the Karzai government.

India needs to build bridges with all the major ethnic groups in Afghanistan. India should balance its relationship with both the Pashtuns and the minority ethnic groups. The idea of engaging anti-India politico-military formations in Afghanistan should not be considered as untenable in the changed and changing scenario in Afghanistan.

- As Indo-Pak relationship impinges on the relations and the interests of all the three countries—India, Pakistan and Afghanistan—and the regions beyond, viable scope for cooperation between the three countries may be explored. To promote a strong sense of economic cooperation in the region, the political and economic interests of the respective countries will have to be accommodated.

India as the world’s largest democracy is playing an important role in supporting democracy, institution-building and in consolidating the achievements of the four-year Bonn process in Afghanistan. In South Asia, India is the only credible country which is in a position to rollback terrorism and religious extremism epitomised by the Taliban movement, in cooperation with the international community.

In fact, India’s role in the economic revival of Afghanistan and in promoting regional economic cooperation is an essential prerequisite. “Attempts to defeat the insurgency in Afghanistan primarily by military means have not been successful”, said Thomas Ruttig of the Afghan Analysts Network, an independent policy research organization. “They have only driven more Afghans to take up arms.”

In all likelihood, therefore, little is likely to change. Britain has already given a time frame of many years for the conditions to stabilize and the foreign troops to return home. Till then, there will be a cat and mouse battle between the Taliban guerillas and the security forces.

However, much also depends on the US future policy in Afghanistan. The inability of the US to address the paradoxes of its ‘war on terror’ has thus far left the political climate in Afghanistan more uncertain and fluid. The persistent divide between the US regional agenda and the interest of Afghanistan does not bode well for the latter. US withdrawal from Afghanistan would inevitably lead to a full comeback of those very forces against whom it had resolved to wage war after 9/11.

In that sense, the consequences of re-abandoning Afghanistan at this critical juncture will be disastrous.

As for India, it will have to wade through the complex maze of Afghan and subcontinental politics, enmeshed with the interests of extra regional powers and actors, to pursue its expanding economic and political interests. For now, growing Indo-Afghan relationship is a reality.

Pankaj Singh is Law Graduate from the National Law Institute University, Bhopal, and LL.M in European Legal Practices with a specialization on European Law Practices from the University of Rouen. He has previously worked with the World Bank, the United Nations and the European Commission.